

Against the Grain

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Booklover -- Africa

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When I was young, going on safari seemed like the most exotic thing you could do. Maybe this idea came from watching **John Wayne** ride on the side of a jeep through the plains of Tanzania in *Hatari* or admiring the richly-detailed photographs published in *National Geographic*; either way I still have a safari on the “to-do” list. In the meantime, I have recently taken a literary safari of Africa, which is more affordable. My guides were **V.S. Naipaul** in *The Masque of Africa: Glimpses of African Belief* and **Ryszard Kapuściński** in *The Shadow of the Sun*.

Before we embark on our safari, I would like to tell you how I got started on this particular literary journey. If you have been a follower of this column you will know about my book-loving friend, **Joy**, who resides in Eleuthera, Bahamas. The recommendation to check out **Ryszard Kapuściński**’s *The Shadow of the Sun* came via her. And although I have read two previous works (*The Bend in the River* and *The Enigma of the Arrival*) by **V.S. Naipaul**, *The Masque of Africa: Glimpses of African Belief* was recently reviewed in the Sunday edition of *The Post and Courier*, the local newspaper in Charleston, SC, by an old classmate. Seemed necessary to pick up the new work and explore it, which led me right down a narrow African alley and the connection to the work of **Ryszard Kapuściński**.

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consequences. Surely, the hackers among us will figure the bit torrent solution to free-for-all with this loophole. Whether libraries will brave the illegality of gaming the loophole — who knows, it’s wild!


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<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/03/technology/03apple.html>

<http://newsbreaks.infotoday.com/News-Breaks/Amazon-Raises-the-Stakes-in-Your-Reading-Experience-The-Platform-War-Continues-74056.asp>

http://blogs.computerworld.com/17913/ipad_2_vs_android?source=CTWNLE_nlt_pm_2011-03-03

<http://blog.libraryjournal.com/annoyedlibrarian/2011/03/02/publishers-have-met-the-enemy-and-it-is-them/>

<http://mashable.com/2010/12/30/kindle-lending-how-to/> 

V.S. Naipaul, a native of Trinidad, won the **Nobel Prize** in Literature in 2001 “for having united perceptive narrative and incorruptible scrutiny in works that compel us to see the presence of suppressed histories.” A recent biography of **V.S. Naipaul** paints a somewhat different and monstrous picture of race, sex, and cruelty. Most of us outsiders only see the beauty created in his words, a few more intimate companions have the privilege of knowing a cruel hand and a tart quip.

Ryszard Kapuściński, a native of Poland, was the only foreign correspondent for the Polish Press Agency with the responsibility of covering 50 countries. His career in journalism began after attending university in Warsaw and carried him throughout the developing world observing the end of European colonialism. **Kapuściński** arrived in Africa in 1957. He was to begin his affair with this country as colonial rule was beginning to dissolve. The book is a work of journalism with a feel of fiction and, by some scholars’ view, more fiction than fact.

Maybe one would not immediately think to join the works of these two authors, but with respect to their writings on Africa, I found a remarkable equality of observation. While **Kapuściński**’s work is a compilation of his adventures as he is reporting from Africa, **Naipaul** has a specific quest in mind. He is exploring African belief, the taboo surrounding it, where did the beliefs arise, how have they been influenced by Western religions, the cruelty, the bigotry, the witchcraft, and what is to be made of it. **Naipaul** speaks of the influence of the missionaries, the fear of the Western world to understand the black magic of Africa, his impressions of the colonial settlements. **Kapuściński** strives to avoid the typical Western enclaves in exchange for the bright, sandy, sometimes dangerous huts of the natives and seeks to uncover the real Africa.

Both find a way to capture the minute and the mundane and make it vibrant, and exotic. This reader wanted to find the saw-marked timber of the stairwell, the **Hewlett Packard** laptop in the chief’s house, the bench on the side of the sandy road, the intense light of an unshaded desert, the corrugated sheet metal homes of Monrovia. Yet, neither book is without its description of the vast natural beauty of Africa. The animals of the Serengeti plains, and the Sezibwa waterfall in the Mukono district of Uganda are two amazing visuals that entertain us.

Sidebar thought, sorta like stopping at a desert oasis: I own a hardback version of *The Shadow of the Sun* and I own an electronic **Kindle** version of *The Masque of Africa: Glimpses of African Belief*. While

immersed in the two perspectives of Africa I am also immersed in the two perspectives of reading styles.

The hardback version allows me to see the book in total, hold it, touch it, embrace the dynamics of the page. It is littered with post-it notes to remind me of passages that spoke to me. The electronic version is fun, new, alive in the sense I can easily take it everywhere with me (as well as all the other books stored on the device). The feature I am currently enamored with is highlighting. I can easily search and retrace my steps along my safari.

No discourse on Africa would be complete without a perspective on race, and this subject was also in the forefront of both of their minds. **Kapuściński**: “In the disturbed, paranoid world of racial inequality, in which everything is determined by the color of one’s skin (calibrated by shades of differences), my illness, while physically incapacitating, had an unexpected benefit. Rendering me weak and defective, it diminished my prestigious white status — that of someone formidable, untouchable — and put me on a more even footing with the black men. Now a diminished, disowned, white man, I could be treated with familiarity, although I was still a white man. A warmth entered my relations with **Edu** and **Abdullahi**. It would have been unthinkable had they met me as a strong, healthy, imperious European.”

Naipaul: “In Trinidad we had overcome some of the effects of history. We had a distinguished group of black professionals; their children reflected the confidence of their parents. We were able, without trouble, to distinguish these people from the general black population. Black and ordinary, black and distinguished: we carried the two ideas in our head, and it could even be said that their blackness added to the distinction of the distinguished.”

Finally, in the Land where creation began, **Kapuściński** observes: “As if one were witnessing the birth of the world, that precise moment where earth and sky already exist, as do water, plants, and wild animals, but not yet **Adam** and **Eve**, it is this world barely born, the world without mankind and hence also without sin, that one can imagine one is seeing here.....It was still night, but Africa’s most dazzling moment was approaching — the break of day.” While **V.S. Naipaul** asks his guide **Phillip** about the “idea of possibility in society”: “In my view the idea of possibility has to do with humanity.” Thus we are left with our beliefs and the hope for humanity. 